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SUBJECT: SARG CLOSES EUROPEAN COMMISSION-FUNDED CIVIL SOCIETY TRAINING CENTER

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4(b)/(d)
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11. (C) SUMMARY: SARG authorities closed the European Commission-funded Civil Society Training Center on March 1, only nine days after its widely-covered opening on February 21. The training center is one of five recently launched EC-sponsored projects in Syria. The shutdown coincided with the visit of an EU Parliament delegation. According to an EC diplomat, the European Commission will be protesting the closing "via diplomatic channels." Meanwhile, a UNDP insider maintained that the real reason for the shutdown was that the training center threatened to directly compete with a planned SARG-organized Commission on Human Rights. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) TRAINING CENTER SHUT DOWN MARCH 1: On March 1, police officers shut down the European Commission-funded Civil Society Training Center, which had been in operation since February 21. Police officers produced an order from the Governor of Damascus, ordering the closure of the center, and proceeded to tape shut all entrances. The training center's director, human rights activist Anwar al-Bunni, told Poloff on March 6 that he had received strong words of support for the EC, which told him that they are holding discussions with Foreign Ministry officials about the center closing. He said that since the closure, the EC had strengthened its position on defending the center: beforehand, the EC had been afraid of taking too confrontational a position, but now "they are really fighting for us." Bunni has offered to step down as center director if this is the main SARG complaint, an offer rejected by EC officials. Bunni also noted that the EC will continue to pay staff salaries and overhead costs for the Center. Bunni will not pursue any legal steps against the SARG for the center shutdown, but will instead leave the negotiating up to the EC. Bunni joked that he will not give up the center but instead create a new Quneitra, referring to the abandoned city in the Golan now used by the SARG for propaganda visits. Bunni does, however, plan to immediately begin the search for new office space for his own law practice.

13. (C) PRESSURE ON CENTER'S LEADERSHIP BEGAN ALMOST IMMEDIATELY: In an earlier conversation on February 26, just days before the shutdown, Bunni noted to Poloff that following the center opening, he had been questioned by both Political Security Directorate (PSD) and Syrian Military Intelligence (SMI) officials about the center's opening, its funding sources, and its planned areas of work. Bunni said he told his interrogators that they should discuss their problems with the EC, put him in jail, or force the center to close. On February 26, Bunni also noted that his problems were not limited to the SARG, as the European Commission has

grown increasingly uneasy about ruffling too many SARG feathers, with Bunni telling an EC representative that they need to support civil society and fight for the project. In the face of pressure from both sides, Bunni had decided to delay training sessions for one month, instead focusing on staff capacity-building. Bunni emphasized to Poloff that the center was to be used only for human rights training and not for any political opposition work, as he had not wanted to "do anything to give the regime a reason to crackdown."

Bunni noted that the press coverage had been helpful and that he had been contacted by a number of "normal" Syrians with no previous civil society experience, asking to participate in future training programs. Bunni also mentioned that two of the first planned training programs were to have targeted forty Syrian police officers, with another aimed at forty imams.

14. (C) TRAINING CENTER ONE OF FIVE EC-SPONSORED PROJECTS:

The European Commission granted funding for the Damascus project through its European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) microproject program to the Belgian organization Institute for International Assistance and Solidarity. The EC is sponsoring four other civil society projects in addition to the training center. Fabienne Besson, the EC diplomat responsible for managing the microproject program, told Poloff in mid-February, well before the SARG-imposed closure, that three of the projects had received the official blessing of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor. However, as early as November 2005, the EC has expressed concerns about the feasibility of implementing projects with unregistered Syrian NGOs.

According to Besson, if any problems were to arise from the SARG, the EC planned to defend its actions as completely allowable under the auspices of Syria's commitment to the Barcelona Process, which allows the EC to sponsor EIDHR

programs without SARG permission.

15. (C) SHUTDOWN COINCIDES WITH EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT VISIT, EC WORKING ON POSITION: The shutdown coincided with the visit of a European Parliament (EP) delegation, headed by Beatrice Patrie, President for EP Relations with the region, beginning February 28 (ref B). According to Fabrice Fernandez, an economist at the EC, the Commission is still working on its response to the shutdown and does consider the shutdown to be of great concern. Fernandez emphasized that civil society was clearly part of the Association Agreement agenda, and that the opening of the center was an accomplishment in and of itself, indicating the EC's long-term vision.

16. (C) DID CENTER POSE A THREAT TO SARG'S OWN CIVIL SOCIETY PLANS? According to Ghimar Deeb, a Syrian lawyer working at the UNDP, the training center will be closed until a UNDP-backed government human rights commission can begin operations. The government commission, which is supported by Foreign Minister Walid Mu'allim, will serve as a clearinghouse for all the human rights groups, including the training center. According to Deeb, the training center did not receive any MFA approval to exist, an oversight which is the justification now being used by the SARG for wrapping the center in red tape. The UNDP project is progressing, as it recently sent a five-person delegation, including a MFA representative and a law school representative, to a conference outside of Syria on establishing of human rights commission. Next month, the UNDP plans to invite to Syria experts on human rights commissions from Jordan, Qatar, Morocco and Egypt, to discuss their own countries' experiences and give advice on setting up a commission in Syria.

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